



Advent: A Season of Waiting

There's something special about the first Sunday of Advent – singing the familiar Advent hymns and lighting the first candle on the Advent wreath. I'll admit, I always feel a thrill of excitement and anticipation that Christmas is just around the corner!

As a child, the day and weeks leading up to Christmas seemed like they dragged on *forever!* In all honesty, the only thing I remember about Advent was trying to “be good” long enough to land a place on Santa's “Nice” list so I would find something under the tree on Christmas morning. Advent was indeed a season of waiting!

As you might expect, my experience of Advent has changed since then. Advent is such a beautiful time that I am saddened by the way it gets neglected in so many places. Too often, the season of Advent is overshadowed by the “holiday season” as we seemingly move from Halloween to Christmas. By the time the actual solemnity of Christmas does arrive, so many of us are tired and burned out from holiday parties and all the “Christmas hype” that Christmas itself becomes anti-climatic.

Spirituality of the Season

The word *Advent* comes from the Latin for “coming” or “arrival.” What is the arrival we are awaiting? The *Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year* helps us understand the season:

Advent has a twofold character, for it is a time of preparation for the Solemnities of Christmas, in which the First Coming of the Son of God to humanity is remembered, and likewise a time when, by remembrance of this, minds and hearts are led to look forward to Christ's Second Coming at the end of time. For these two reasons, Advent is a period of devout and expectant delight. (39)

“Expectant delight” – what beautiful imagery! You will notice it does not say it is a penitential season, but rather a time of joyful hope, a time of preparation, and a time of waiting. While there is an element of penance in preparing, this season is more about quieting and disciplining our hearts for the full joy of Christmas. At the same time, this season is not just about preparing for the birth of Christ at Christmas. Advent prepares us for the Christ who is continually being born in our midst and transforming the Church ever more into his body in the world.

In the late autumn of the year, at least here in the Northern Hemisphere, as the world darkens, the Church is called to gather and quietly wait in hope for the coming of Christ, her bridegroom, the Light of the World. I am reminded of the song by Marty Haugen, “For you, O Lord, my soul in stillness waits; truly my hope is in you.” Is our hope really in Christ? Have we really allowed ourselves to wait in silence and ponder the great mystery of salvation? Have we been changed by our reflection on this mystery so that we live differently as our relationship with the risen Christ deepens? In the darkness that falls across the land, we watch and wait for the coming Lord. We must not let the busy-ness of our lives distract us from that. The gospel for the first Sunday of Advent this year, charges us to “stand erect and raise [our] heads.” Truly the season calls us to be attentive to our preparations for the final day and attentive to the quality of our life in union with Christ.

The Liturgies for the Sundays of Advent

How, then, do we, as preparers of liturgy, reflect the themes of *stillness*, *waiting*, and *expectant delight* in our work and ministry? The liturgies of Advent are different than Ordinary Time. It begins with looking *forward* to future, comes to a climax in looking to the *past*, while bearing fruit in the *present*.

The Lectionary

Each of the Gospel readings for the four Sundays of Advent has a distinctive theme. On the first Sunday, we are reminded of the Lord’s coming at the end of time. The second and third Sundays direct our attention to John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ. And it is not until the fourth Sunday of Advent when we hear of the events that immediately prepared for the birth of Christ. The Old Testament readings are prophecies about the Messiah and the Messianic age, while the readings from the Epistles contain exhortations and proclamations, in keeping with the themes of Advent.

Music Selections

The challenge of Advent and our Christian life is to heighten our expectation of the coming of Christ so that we can be attentive to Christ’s presence already among us. Attentive waiting is a presence that is redemptive and something to be mindful of when selecting music.

The songs we sing for the first two Sundays should focus on Christ’s coming in glory at the end of time. Singing songs such as *Soon and Very Soon*; *The King Shall Come*; *Lift Up Your Heads, O Mighty Gates*; *City of God*; and *When the Lord in Glory Comes* will pull us into the messianic vision which characterizes the beginning two weeks of Advent.

Songs such as *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*; *Come, O Long Expected Jesus*; *People, Look East; Creator of the Stars of Night*; *Savior of the Nations, Come*; and *O Come, Divine Messiah* and others that express the imminent expectation of the Christ Child’s arrival are better suited for the last two weeks of Advent.

Rejoice! Rejoice!

Emmanuel

Shall come to you,

O Israel

The Environment the Season of Advent



Liturgical Color

Since the codification of the liturgical colors in the Roman Catholic Church, purple/violet had been the color of the penitential seasons. While Advent does not take on the same penitential character of Lent, it still includes an element of penance in the sense of preparing and disciplining our hearts for the full joy of Christmas.

This penitential dimension is expressed through the color purple/violet, but also through the restrained manner of decorating the church and the altar. Floral decoration is not prohibited during Advent; however, attention should be paid so that it is moderately suited to the character of the time of year and does not express the full joy of the Nativity of the Lord.

The third Sunday of Advent is called *Gaudete* Sunday, coming from the first word of the Latin Entrance Antiphon for this day, meaning “Rejoice.” The liturgical color for that Sunday may be rose instead of purple/violet. This is the Church’s way of further heightening our expectation as we draw ever nearer to the Solemnity of Christmas.

The Advent Wreath

Historical roots and theological interpretation

The origin of the Advent wreath is somewhat obscure. There is evidence that in pre-Christian Scandinavia a wheel was decorated with candles while prayers were offered for the wheel of the earth to be turned so that light, life, and warmth would return. During the Middle Ages, Christians adopted this pagan ritual and began to use it in domestic settings. By the year 1500, more formal practices surrounding the Advent wreath had developed.

Its symbols of life and light apply to the Christian cosmology in which Christ is both the light that dispels the darkness and the life of the world. The wheel itself, a circle with neither beginning nor end, signifies eternal life. The evergreens signify eternal life, while more specifically, pine, holly and yew imply immortality. Cedar signifies strength and healing; laurel, victory over suffering; pine cones and nuts, life and resurrection. In its totality, the wreath symbolizes new and eternal life gained through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The four candles added to the wreath symbolize the four weeks of Advent. According to some traditions, three or four of these candles are purple, referring to the prayer and sacrifices offered in preparation for the celebration of Christmas. Sometimes, one of the candles – the one lit on *Gaudete* Sunday, the third Sunday of Advent – is rose and invites the people to rejoice because the middle of Advent has been reached.

Ritual use

Because the Advent wreath has become the central symbol of the season, it is good that it be integrated in the celebration of the liturgy on each Sunday of Advent. The blessing of the Advent Wreath takes place on the First Sunday of Advent, or the evening before the First Sunday of Advent. When the blessing happens in the context of Sunday Mass, it takes place at the

conclusion of the Universal Prayer (Prayer of the Faithful). The Order of Blessing may be found in the *Book of Blessings*, Chapter 47. The second and succeeding Sundays of Advent the candles are lighted either before Mass begins or immediately before the Collect (Opening Prayer).

O Antiphons – Celebrating the Revelation of God in Christ

Although not highlighted on most calendars, *December 17* is a red-letter day on the liturgical calendar. This date marks the second part of Advent, the beginning of what is sometimes referred to as “The Golden Nights.” It also marks the beginning of the *O Antiphons*, and the final week before Christmas.

We’ve all heard the *O Antiphons* at one point or another in our journey of faith. These seven precious jewels of our Catholic liturgy compose the verses to the beloved Advent hymn, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*. They are commonly called “The O’s of Advent” because they all begin with that interjection.

The canonical Hour of Vespers has been selected as the most appropriate time for this solemn supplication to our Savior Jesus Christ, because, as the Church sings in one of her hymns, it was in the evening of the world that the Messiah came among us. These antiphons are sung at the Magnificat, to show us that the Savior whom we expect is to come to us by Mary. They are sung twice, once before and once after the canticle of Mary, to show their greater solemnity.

December 17

Antiphon: *O Wisdom / O Sapientia (Eccl 24:5), You came forth from the mouth of the Most High (Sir 24:30), and reaching from beginning to end You ordered all things mightily and sweetly (Wis 8:1). Come, and teach us the way of truth (Isa 40:14).*

In this antiphon, we take a backward flight

into the recesses of eternity to address Wisdom, the Word of God.

December 18

Antiphon: *O Lord / O Adonai (Exod 6:13) and Ruler of the House of Israel (Matt 2:6), You appeared to Moses in the fire of the burning bush (Exod 3:2) and on Mount Sinai gave him Your Law (Exod 20). Come, and with an outstretched arm redeem us (Jer 32:21).*

In this antiphon, we leap to the time of Moses and the Law (about 1400 B.C.) where we meet God in the burning bush and on Mount Sinai.

December 19

Antiphon: *O Root of Jesse / O Radix Jesse, You stand for the ensign of humankind (Isa 11:10); before You kings shall keep silence and to You all nations shall have recourse (Isa 52:15). Come, save us, and do not delay.*

In this third antiphon, *O Radix Jesse*, we have come to the time when God is preparing the line of David (1100 B.C.). As we know from Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is born of the house of David.

December 20

Antiphon: *O Key of David / O Clavis David (Rev 3:7) and Scepter of the house of Israel: You open and no one closes; you close and no one opens (Isa 22:22). Come, and deliver those from the chains of prison who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death (Ps. 107:10).*

By the fourth antiphon, we have come to the year 1000 and meet the Lord as the one who opens the door to salvation.

December 21

Antiphon: *O Rising Dawn / O Oriens (Zac 6:12), Radiance of the Light eternal (Habukkuk 3:4) and Sun of Justice (Mal 3:20): Come, and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death (Ps. 107:10; Luke 1:78).*

In this fifth antiphon, *O Oriens*, we see that the line of David is elevated so that the peoples may look to a rising star in the east.

December 22

Antiphon: *O King of the Nations / O Rex Gentium (Haggai 2:8), and the Desired of all, You are the Cornerstone that binds two into one (Eph 2:20). Come, and save the one whom You fashioned out of clay (Gen 2:7).*

In the sixth antiphon, *O Rex Gentium*, we know that the Lord is King over all the world.

December 23

Antiphon: *O Emmanuel (Isa 7:14; 8:8), our King and Lawgiver (Gen 49:10; Ezek 21:32), the Expected of the nations and their Savior (Isa 33:22): Come, and save us, O Lord our God.*

When we sing this antiphon, it is the evening before the vigil, and before coming to the “city limits” of Bethlehem. We have traveled a long distance and have waited a long time, but at Bethlehem, we are to find the Little One who is Emmanuel, God-with-us. He is God of God and Light of Light.

Did you know...put in reverse order:

Emmanuel

Rex,

Oriens

Clavis

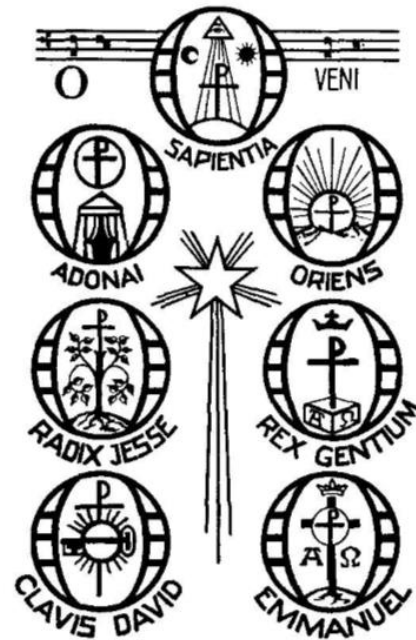
Radix

Adonai

Sapientia

...the first letters of these Messianic titles spell the Latin words **ERO CRAS**, meaning, “**Tomorrow, I will come.**”

The O antiphons sum up in excellence the longing of our Redeemer, and we echo the prayers of the Old Testament by begging Him to “Come!”



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